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The training and supervision of teaching assistants in German at Indiana University is summarized. Training through orientation, course work, teaching, visitation, and observation is outlined. Special attention is directed to group observation techniques. The use of video tape recordings and veteran teaching assistants to improve the effectiveness of the training process is also described. (AF)

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GROUP OBSERVATION AND THE TRAINING OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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There is still a widespread belief that teaching assistants at large foreign language departments are let loose on the beginning courses without appropriate guidance and supervision. Sadly enough, this belief has been verified by the meritorious McAlister Report of 1964, which on the basis of its nation-wide investigation, stated that 60% of our major colleges and universities did not provide any training or guidance for their teaching assistants. Though lacking more recent reliable data on this subject, we may safely assume that within the last three years more and more institutions have developed TA training procedures and that the national picture looks less discouraging in 1968. These procedures certainly differ both in quality and quantity. However, if more information on successful TA training programs is made available, we may assume that this will lead to continued improvement of instructional quality and professional preparation.

Intensive training and supervision of TA's has been a long tradition in our department. The overall program has been described by Henry H. H. Remak in an article entitled "The Training and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in German," *MLJ*, XXXXI (1957), 212–214.

Here is a summary of its basic features:

1. *Training through orientation meeting*
   All new TA's participate in pre-training sessions conducted by the director of 1st and 2nd-year work, the TA advisor, and the course chairmen of the respective courses.

2. *Training through course work*
   All TA's and candidates for the master's and doctoral degrees are required to enroll in a graduate course, "Problems and Methods of College German Teaching," (G 500, 3 credit hours).

3. *Training through teaching*
   The following rules are strictly observed:
   a) Regular pre-semester and weekly briefings by course chairmen of elementary courses. (Slightly varied in advanced courses);
   b) Mimeographed, day-by-day course outlines and teaching hints for the entire semester are distributed;
   c) Close cooperation with course chairmen and fellow TA's in the planning and grading of exams;
   d) Grade evaluation reports are given to course chairmen or TA advisor before midterm and final examinations;
   e) Discussion of individual mid-semester and semester grades with course chairmen or TA advisor.

4. *Training through visitation*
   Visiting is conducted in the following manner:
   a) Regular visits by course chairmen in elementary courses;
   b) Regular visits to all TA sections by Advisor of Teaching Assistants (experienced faculty member with slightly reduced teaching load);
   c) Additional visits by other faculty members under a General Visitation Program (Each faculty member is assigned one TA whom he visits twice during the semester. Following the visit the faculty member discusses the period with the TA and by the end of the semester, submits a written report on his observations to the departmental chairman and the TA advisor.)
5. *Training through observation*
   TA's are required to visit classes of their course chairmen and fellow TA's teaching other sections of the same course as well as to advanced undergraduate classes taught by experienced faculty members. A minimum of three visits per semester is expected.

Basically, this system has worked well despite the rapid growth of our teaching staff and student enrollment. Continuous re-examination of our procedures in terms of maximal training value and economy with much larger groups of TA's (now 35) led to a new feature which we call *Group Observation*. In addition to the individual visits, group visits to various selected classes have been introduced. These visits are directed by the TA advisor and are aimed at closer observation and evaluation of the manifold aspects of college German teaching. This procedure may be outlined as follows:

1. Four to six TA's and the TA advisor arrange and announce their visit to the class of a faculty member or an experienced TA who has volunteered to receive visitors during one of his normal class periods. The class assignment and the program of the day of the visit are announced to all participants ahead of time so that each of them can familiarize himself with the material and think up his own suggestions on how to teach the same period under similar circumstances.
2. The group observes the class either in the regular classroom, seated in the back for minimum disturbance of students, or in a special observation room equipped with a one-way glass wall.
3. Visitors and teacher get together immediately after class for a discussion of the period (at least 30 minutes).

Usually about twenty such visits are arranged throughout the semester at regular intervals. Each teaching assistant is required to sign up twice during the semester for participation in these visits.

As compared to the customary practice of single visits paid by individual teaching assistants to classes of more experienced teachers—often in haphazard style and without any previous knowledge of what to expect—the practice of group visits has shown definite advantages. Visitors enter class with exact information about what has been assigned and what is going to be taught, and hence with specific expectations which guide and sharpen their attention from the beginning. It is important that all participating observers are familiar with the teaching material, e.g. that textbooks or mimeographed copies of texts are made available to all of them and that all have *read* the material and given it some thought. Also, in many cases visitors have been asked to concentrate their attention—either individually or as a group—on certain aspects of the class situation they are going to observe. Such aspects are: the use of German throughout the period, the technique of asking questions, drill techniques, use of blackboard and visual aids, student behavior and participation (behind-the-scene happenings), timing and pace, appearance of teacher, etc. This encourages a maximum of observation of the various things which actually happen in a classroom and which so easily escape the attention of inexperienced observers.

Occasional use has been made of a special observation room where visitors remain hidden behind a sound-proof glass screen allowing one-way vision only. This has permitted participation of a larger number of visitors as well as communication among them during the observation. It was felt by all parties involved, however, that group visits in this manner created more nervousness on the part of the teacher and his class (due to the awareness of a mysteriously hidden audience whose immediate reactions could neither be seen nor felt) than it was supposed to alleviate. Visits in smaller groups to regular classrooms were felt to create a more natural situation and even to contribute to a pleasant atmosphere through introduction of visitors to the class and through their occasional contributions to class activities.

In the discussion following the observation period, the teacher is given the first word to explain his plan and methods, to assess participation of his students (attendance, preparation, etc.), and to indicate whether the period as a whole turned out to be what he had anticipated or whether unexpected results had occurred. This is important information without which an outside observer cannot properly evaluate class achievement after one visit only. Such an explanation becomes especially pertinent and touches the very heart of the matter if changes of the original plan or method had to be made because of unforseen obstacles which turned up during the period. For example, a review or repetition of a grammatical item may have become necessary, or a drill may have had to be changed because of insufficient preparation by the students. The handling of similar obstacles by experienced teachers is one of the most valuable sources of information and insight for the new TA's. It is for

this reason that group observation should definitely include visits to "problematic" or "difficult" classes taught by understanding teachers who are aware of the situation and capable of making the best of it.

After the teacher's explanatory remarks, the various observations of his visitors are discussed. Criticisms and suggestions come last and are handled, as everything else, with fairness and tact. It depends on the skill of the TA advisor, whose role in this discussion is that of a moderator, how much constructive criticism is given and that it be contributed in good taste.

Audio-visual recordings of excerpts from class periods provided by a portable video-tape machine have added another facet of observation to our training program. Conceding the fact that, due to technical limitations, such recordings cannot yield the full range of information provided by "live" visits to classes, they have been of great help whenever observation has concentrated on certain details of teaching. Video-tape recordings of smaller teaching units—such as introduction of dialogues, pattern drills, and question and answer periods—each no longer than 8–10 minutes, are being used for self-evaluation in working with individual TA's as well as for group discussions. Observation and discussion of video-tape material has become the most important audio-visual aid in our orientation meeting with new teaching assistants prior to the beginning of each fall semester.

Another possibility for senior TA's to receive further training through observation has been recently created. From among these veteran assistants, all of whom have been teaching successfully for at least three semesters, eleven volunteered in the spring semester of 1967 to co-operate with faculty members in the teaching supervision of their younger colleagues. They assisted in the General Visitation Program (as outlined under 4,c above) in a way which we decided to incorporate as a regular feature into our training program in the future, and which can be outlined as follows:

1. Senior TA's are assigned to individual faculty members as assistant supervisors of junior TA's.
2. Senior TA's visit classes of junior TA's twice during the semester, the first visit being separate from, the second in conjunction with that of the co-operating faculty member.
3. Senior TA's confer separately with both junior TA's and faculty members after the first visit. The conference after the last (joint) visit should include all three persons concerned.
4. In addition, senior TA's serve as personal advisors in teaching matters to junior TA's (especially to new TA's) throughout the semester.

This arrangement has worked well so far. It has given senior teaching assistants an opportunity to learn how to evaluate the teaching of others through closer and more responsible observation and through exchange and discussion of impressions with an experienced teacher. It has furthermore paved the way towards a better pedagogical co-operation between TA's and faculty on the one hand, and between senior assistants and new TA's on the other. It has thus helped—as has our entire training program since its beginnings some 15 years ago—to create and maintain a pedagogical "esprit de corps" within our department, which we hope will continue to improve the quality of teaching on all levels.

Indiana University

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